

VZCZCXRO5839
OO RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW
DE RUEHNE #2513/01 2621240
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 181240Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI IMMEDIATE 3513
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3447
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 002513

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: KARNATAKA CHURCH ATTACKS ROOTED IN POLITICS; BJP MISHANDLES RESPONSE

REF: A) NEW DELHI 2498 B) CHENNAI 315

This cable was drafted by Consulate General Chennai.

11. (SBU) Summary: On September 14, many Christian churches came under simultaneous attack by Hindu mobs in the coastal districts of southwest Karnataka (ref B) and the city of Mangalore. The damage to the churches was extensive, and exacerbated by heavy-handed police responses to Christian protests in the wake of the September 14 attacks. Unlike Orissa, where caste played a critical role in the recent unrest there (ref A), the major factors in Karnataka's recent religious violence were the competitive political environment in the state's southwestern districts and the arrival of newer Protestant denominations that are believed to be more focused on conversion than the traditional Catholic and Protestant churches. Although there is no evidence directly linking the state's Bharatiya Janata Party-led government to the outbreak of violence, the state government must bear responsibility for its anemic response and the fact that the targets of police action were often the victims themselves. Violence flared up again on September 17, with three additional churches attacked, and we believe sporadic attacks could continue if the state government does not focus on preventing further violence. Consulate General Chennai will continue to monitor the situation closely.

12. (SBU) On September 16 Political/Economic Officer toured churches and religious institutions in Mangalore, Karnataka in the wake of the September 14 attacks on Christian institutions in and around the South Indian city (ref B) and the September 15 protests by Christians against the attacks. The city was at a standstill due to a general strike called by the Hindu organization Srirama Sena. Schools and government institutions were all closed, and most commercial establishments remained shuttered. There was minimal vehicle and foot traffic and a heavy police presence throughout the city. Due to the intra-community tension and the potential for violence, we moved around the city by following Karnataka Congress Party President Mallikarjun Kharge's police-protected motorcade. Despite the heavy police presence protecting Kharge, chanting BJP supporters briefly detained his vehicle by surrounding it but they eventually dispersed and allowed the motorcade to proceed.

"Well Planned" Attack Desecrated Convent Chapel

13. (SBU) Standing amidst broken glass and overturned pews in the Perpetual Adoration convent's small chapel, four parishioners from the nearby Milagres Catholic Church described the September 14 attack. The convent is a few hundred meters from the Milagres Church, with which the convent is associated. One of the parishioners, who had been praying in the chapel at the time, said that a group of ten to fifteen men came to the convent chapel around 10:15 a.m. on Sunday, September 14 and began breaking windows and desecrating holy images. She assumed the attackers were Hindus, but said they did not identify themselves as such. The damage we

observed was extensive: the attackers had shattered all of the windows in the chapel, broken off the arm of the statue of Jesus Christ on the cross, and damaged the chalice used to offer the Eucharist.

14. (SBU) According to the parishioners, the attack lasted less than ten minutes. One said it was a "well planned attack," because the attackers knew that most congregants would be attending Sunday services at nearby Milagres leaving the convent unwatched. The parishioner who was in the chapel when the attack began said that although the attackers let her escape she saw that they moved purposefully through the chapel as if they had planned to inflict maximum damage in a minimum amount of time. The spokesperson for the Bishop of Mangalore told us that the "multiple, simultaneous attacks" indicated a high degree of advanced planning. A policeman we spoke to at the scene of the violence at Perpetual Adoration convent discounted the idea that the attacks were well-planned; he blamed "rowdies" for the attack, but declined to offer any further explanation.

Protestant churches attacked en masse

15. (SBU) On the same day as the attack on the Perpetual Adoration monastery, Protestant churches throughout three coastal districts in southwest Karnataka came under attack (ref B). According to media reports 17 churches were attacked on September 14, but the All India Christian Council (AICC) told post that they had confirmed 27 attacks on that day. The Karnataka AICC President said that Hindu fundamentalist groups attacked isolated Protestant churches in "calculated, strategic attacks." According to the AICC, the Hindu groups by and large targeted statues, altars, and religious books,

NEW DELHI 00002513 002 OF 004

and also physically assaulted parishioners who attempted to stop the desecration of their churches. As a result, according to the AICC, 50 to 70 people suffered injuries but there were no fatalities.

Catholic protests lead to severe police retaliation

16. (SBU) At the St. Sebastian Catholic Church in Permannur, outside of Mangalore, parishioners described the violent police response to a Christian protest. St. Sebastian's associate priest told us that the congregation had gathered on September 15 to protest the previous day's attacks on churches in Karnataka. When the police ordered the protestors to disperse, the protestors moved into the church. The priest acknowledged that, as the congregation sought shelter in the church, "some of the young men threw stones" at the policemen who were demanding they disperse. The priest said the police immediately responded by storming the building, "beating our people like mad dogs," and ransacking the church. We saw damage throughout the entire church building. Windows were shattered, a statue of the Virgin Mary knocked over, filing cabinets broken open, and the priests' personal quarters rummaged through. The breadth and intensity of the destruction suggested a police response that was far out of proportion to the alleged provocation.

17. (SBU) Nuns at the nearby Kulshekhar Catholic Church told a similar story. They said that members had gathered on the road in front of the Church on September 15 to protest the previous day's attacks. According to a local policeman, the large crowd of Christians blocked vehicle traffic on the road, prompting police to demand they cease their protest. Nuns who witnessed the protest said the police gave the protestors just minutes to respond to their demand to disperse before the police used tear gas and riot control canes on the assembled crowd. According to the nuns, the police followed the protestors when they fled into the nearby Sacred Heart School. Inside the school, police allegedly beat several students and nuns who had taken shelter there. The nuns told us that at least three nuns and five students, along with many other protestors, had to be hospitalized as a result of the police beatings. We observed little physical damage to the school, however.

¶8. (SBU) The difference in approach between the Catholic Church, which has a long history in South India, and the new Protestant denominations appears to have been an important factor in the recent events in Karnataka. The Catholic Church claims an almost 2,000 year history in South India, believing that Christ's Apostle Thomas came to India in 54 A.D. The 16th century arrival of the Portuguese cemented the role of the Catholic Church in the region. Although Protestant churches have been present in India since British rule and formally joined together to form the Church of South India in 1947, Protestant activity stepped up substantially in South India during the 1990s as new, smaller charismatic Protestant churches entered the field.

¶9. (SBU) Many contacts attributed the problem in Karnataka to the newer Protestant churches, which have a reputation for being more aggressive than the more established Catholic Church and Church of South India (CSI). A political scientist based in Udupi district, where a number of churches were attacked on September 14, told us that the established Christian communities (referring to the Catholic Church and the CSI) "know how to deal" with Hindu sensitivities by not emphasizing conversion. The day after the church attacks, the Bishop of Mangalore said that "we never encourage conversions." The Karnataka chief of the controversial Hindu fundamentalist group Bajrang Dal told reporters "we have no problems with the Catholic churches" because, in his opinion, they do not engage in questionable proselytization activities.

Controversial "New Life Fellowship"
angers Hindus and Catholics alike

¶10. (SBU) It is clear that one particular church, the "New Life Fellowship," plays a central role in the recent events in Karnataka. We found that New Life was a lightning rod for criticism from Hindu and established Christian churches alike. Hindu groups, including the Bajrang Dal, referred to a pamphlet allegedly produced by New Life that insulted Hindu deities as an explanation for the September 14 attacks. Bajrang Dal's Karnataka head, Mahendra Kumar, reportedly told reporters that "they [New Life] say our Gods don't exist." Kumar also accused New Life of forcible conversions of Hindus.

NEW DELHI 00002513 003 OF 004

¶11. (SBU) Interlocutors told us that the CSI and Catholic church also take issue with New Life because the new church has been targeting their members for conversion. They explained that New Life has successfully focused on converting Konkani Catholics, a linguistic minority in the Karnataka Catholic church, and more recently has turned its efforts to members of the CSI. Parishioners from Milagre Catholic Church were furious at the mention of New Life. Echoing the Bajrang Dal's claim that New Life insulted Hindu gods, the parishioners blamed New Life for instigating attacks by members of the Hindu majority. They also claimed that New Life offered food and money to poor people -- Hindu and Catholic alike -- to induce them to convert.

¶12. (SBU) We were unable to reach leaders of the New Life church, but in statements to the media various New Life pastors said the church does not engage in forcible conversions and denied that their church had printed the offensive pamphlet attributed to it. Govind Belgaumkar, Mangalore bureau chief of The Hindu, said that to his knowledge, no evidence has been produced to show that New Life either forced or induced conversions. He told post, however, that he did see a copy of the pamphlet attributed to New Life. Although it was impossible for him to say that New Life actually produced the pamphlet, the journalist did say that the pamphlet contained scurrilous descriptions of Hindu deities. The Karnataka AICC President said he believed the pamphlet was actually produced by Hindu fundamentalists to whip up anger against Christians, which he claimed was a common practice in India.

Link to Orissa unclear but AICC blames BJP

¶13. (SBU) The degree to which the Karnataka attacks and the recent communal violence in Orissa (ref A) are linked is unclear. Contacts agreed that, unlike in Orissa, there is no caste angle to the attacks in Karnataka. But Belgaumkar of The Hindu said he felt there was some connection between the attacks in the two states. He said he had seen provocative pamphlets the Sangh Parivar (an umbrella term for BJP-affiliated Hindu nationalist groups) circulated throughout Mangalore in the days before the attacks about the killing of Swami Lakshmananda, the Hindu leader whose assassination set off the violence in Orissa.

¶14. (SBU) A consultant who works closely with AICC told post that although they had found "no hard link" between Orissa and Karnataka, the Karnataka attackers may have been emboldened to engage in "copycat attacks because of the lack of consequences" for the perpetrators of the Orissa violence. The President of the Karnataka branch of the AICC claimed there was such a link, but did not provide any evidence and proceeded to talk about the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) culpability for laying the groundwork for the Karnataka attacks.

BJP/Congress rivalry plays out in church attacks

¶15. (SBU) Several contacts said the church attacks were more the result of local political conditions than any prevailing anti-Christian sentiment. They emphasized the role of the BJP/Congress rivalry. They noted the region is closely split -- basically 50/50 -- between the Congress and BJP and that both sides believe they could gain from communal tensions: BJP by energizing Hindu voters and Congress by consolidating the areas substantial minority populations. Belgaumkar of The Hindu told us that the BJP did not do as well as it had expected to do in Mangalore during the last elections. As a result, he said, local party leaders felt pressured "to do something to regain their base." A Mangalore-based Congress party leader told us that political positioning in advance of the upcoming parliamentary elections created conditions favorable for intra-religious violence, but he refused to say BJP was directly responsible for the attacks.

¶16. (SBU) Christian views of the BJP's role were split. Unlike the CSI and Catholic Church, which did not directly attribute the violence to BJP control of Karnataka state government, newer Protestant churches explicitly did so. The Karnataka AICC President told post that "the main reason for the attacks is that BJP is in power in Bangalore." He argued that timing of the attacks -- the weekend after the BJP held its national party conference in Bangalore -- is evidence that they were part of a deliberate electoral strategy to demonize Christians.

BJP blamed for lax police response; attacks continue

¶17. (SBU) Several contacts blamed BJP control for hampering the

NEW DELHI 00002513 004 OF 004

state government response once the attacks happened. Belgaumkar of The Hindu said police officers told him that their hands are tied. As evidence, Belgaumkar pointed out that Bajrang Dal perpetrators remain free despite the fact that the group's leader Mahendra Kumar admitted at a press conference that its members committed the church attacks in retaliation for forced conversions. A Bangalore-based human rights NGO told post it recorded instances in which police watched but did not intervene when large groups of Hindu protestors gather outside of churches. According to the NGO, this was clear evidence that the police were allowing Hindu groups to intimidate Christians. Several interlocutors also pointed out that the vast majority of people arrested to date have been Christians who were protesting, while very few Hindu have been picked up for their involvement in the actual church attacks.

¶18. (SBU) Although media contacts told us that Mangalore had returned to normal by September 18, church groups expressed fears that the attacks will continue. The AICC noted that the attacks

continued past the weekend, with at least three churches hit on September 17. On September 16, BJP Chief Minister Yeddyurappa told reporters that "in the backdrop of reports about forcible conversions in parts of the state, which led to attacks on churches, the government has ordered a scrutiny of such accounts which receive foreign funds for conversion." One pastor told post that the Chief Minister's September 16 statement, which seemed to justify the church attacks as a reasonable response to forcible conversions by Christians, emboldened militant Hindu groups to keep up the attacks. The announcement of the plan to investigate foreign funding of churches was evidence that Yeddyurappa's government blamed the victims of the attacks, according to the pastor.

Comment: BJP dropping the ball on response to attacks

¶19. (SBU) Comment. The multiple, simultaneous church attacks appear to be a well-planned campaign rather than a spontaneous outburst - as was the case in Orissa -- of Hindu outrage. They stem from the region's close electoral balance and the emergence of new Protestant churches in the area. There is no evidence, however, that links the attacks directly to the BJP government that runs Karnataka. That said, the government bears a great deal of responsibility for the police's inadequate and often misplaced response. It appears that, at minimum, local government and police feel that they should not act aggressively against the Hindu fundamentalists. This impression has no doubt been reinforced by the Chief Minister's partial justification of the attacks and deflection of responsibility onto the victims themselves. Worse yet, we saw evidence that the police felt justified in using excessive force to quell the Christian protests that followed the attacks. We believe sporadic attacks could continue if the state government does not focus on preventing further violence. Consulate officers remain in Karnataka and we will continue to monitor the situation closely. End comment.

Mulford